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STORY-TELLING AS A MOTIVE IN PAINTING

BY JNO. GILMER SPEED.

With original illustrations by Harry Roseland.



MY SAILOR GIRL.

THE dispute as to the province and limitations of pictorial art is as old as that art itself, but it is not less fierce to-day than when it began. Possibly, therefore, upon the theory that that which always has been always will be, this dispute will never end; but, on the contrary, will have a wider field as pictorial art becomes of more consequence in the world. Those who would place upon pictorial art the narrowest limitations are the severely critical enthusiasts who have inscribed upon their banner "Art for art's sake," and with loud and angry insistence they declare that when a painter attempts to make his picture convey anything beyond a sentiment of beauty he has attempted the impossible and can do nothing else than achieve failure.

When some really great artist has done this

thing in so masterful a fashion that his work cannot be turned to scorn, then the "art-for-art's-sake" gentry declare that the achievement of something further than beauty was due to the atmosphere of poetry that the individual painter conveyed from his own plenteous greatness to the canvas upon which he worked. He can create an atmosphere of poetry, but on his canvas with his colors he cannot make poetry. As for the painter who attempts to tell a story on his canvas, their scorn is too deep for words; for him only the shrugged shoulder and the outstretched and upturned palms. They say that he is working only for the "average person," and when they write they never fail to employ quotation marks to express their contempt for this sad incapable.

If my own predilections in art were



YES OR NO?

of any consequence, I would say that I did not myself care particularly for the picture whose worth depended on the tale that it told, but I would declare at the same time that I did not think the beauty or the worth of a picture was marred by the fact that it did tell a story.

The truth appears to be that neither of the extremists in this old controversy is quite right. Painting a picture, merely to tell a story which could better be told by words, is in theory wrong because in an artistic performance the most suitable art should be employed. Writing is one art and painting is another. But the writer makes pictures which the words enable the reader to see in his mind, and the painter with his colors suggests stories which the beholder completes in his mind. Though this may be all wrong it is nevertheless true, and it is right that it should be true. For must those much-despised "average persons," who do not understand and do not appreciate the canvases with "poetic atmosphere" be deprived of all art because a picture that tells a story must be sacrificed to those who cry "Art for art's sake," and give no quarter in their charge? If this should be, I wonder what would happen to the beautiful maga-



THE CLOSING HYMN.



THE OYSTERMAN.

zines which circulate in the English-speaking world in ever-increasing numbers.

But there are so many more average persons than those who arrogate to themselves all cultivation, that the painters who go about their work in the way that seems best to them are not likely to want for their daily bread if their way happens to be the way of the many who are indifferent to these self-constituted censors.

The fact is, however, that the great public does not care for that which lacks merit either in literature or art. I have wondered at the



MY FAIR COXSWAIN.

refinements. But never in a single instance have I given such a work careful study that I was not able to detect a good reason for the popularity. In every instance there was evidence in the work, whether it was a painting or a novel, that the creator had put into it the very best that was in him, and that therefore it was a sincere performance. The public detected the sincerity and was pleased by it, and without sincerity on the part of the artist there can never be anything better than a semblance of artistic accomplishment. Better the crudities a thousand times if with them we get the very best that in the worker is, than the mere dandified and dilettante flippancies of the vain coxcombs who spend their days in idleness



A MODERN MAUD MÜLLER.

popularity of pictures and of books which did not please one in the least, that is, which did not attract one by a casual glance, but which rather offended by certain crudities and un-



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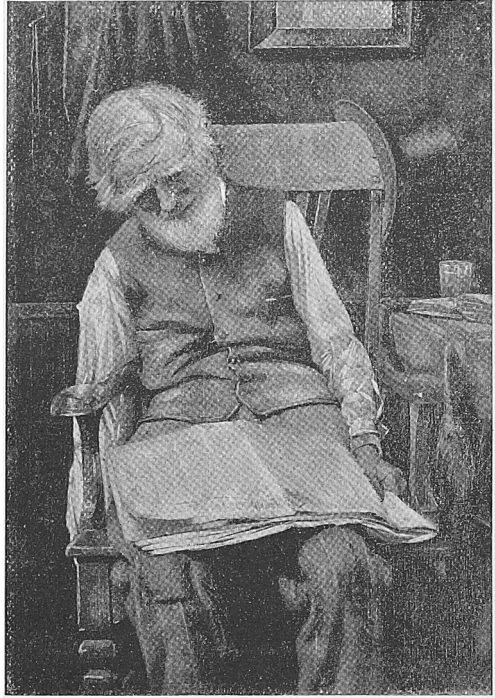


THE FAIR DEVOTEE.

and have no time for serious toil. Even the most skilful artist accomplishes nothing when he is not in earnest.

A story by an unknown hand was published a number of years ago—"Called

Back." The critics saw nothing to admire in it, but the public did, and it had a great vogue, and there be those now no doubt who will remember that "Hugh Conway" was the name on the title-page. Henry James, than whom there is not a more skilful writer living to-day, was amused at the success of "Called Back." "I see the trick of that," he said to his friends, "I will do something of the same kind." So he employed the trick and published his story, which the public would not have at all. The reason was that the public saw his trick, but did not see any trick in "Called Back." Indeed there was no trick in it—it was an entirely serious performance. And so also with other books which the critics decry but which the public purchases and reads. So it is, too, with pictures, and so it is likely to remain, and I for one will always have respect for the achievements of either painter or writer who catches and holds the public attention by the sincerity with which he pursues



PLAYED OUT.



THE BACK PEW.



ONION WEEDERS.

his art as he understands it. It is not given to all of us to be sublime, but most of us can be earnest if we do but try.



GOSSIPS IN THE PEA-FIELD.



ABSORBED.

This little preachment in pictorial tale-telling and the effect of sincerity was provoked by a visit to the studio of Mr. Harry Roseland, some of whose paintings

have been reproduced to accompany this article. As will be seen by these prints, Mr. Roseland, in his artistic performances, is essentially a story-teller. Fortunately for himself and for his work he is not in the least ashamed of this, which is as it should be. I wish I had asked him whether he had read Mr. Van Dyke's book, but I forgot it. Had I done so it may be that instead of what I have said above I should have reported Mr. Roseland's opinion of the much-vexed subject. But 'tis too late now.

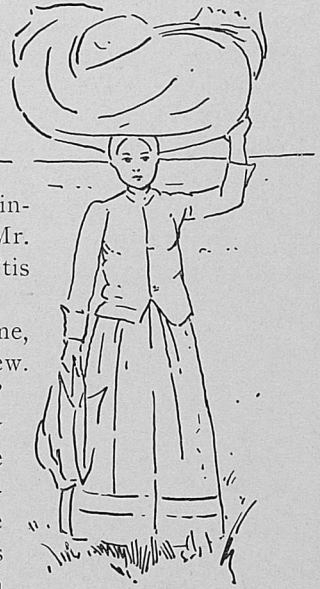
In selecting his subjects Mr. Roseland, it seems to me, does not attempt the impossible from any point of view. Take, for instance, the one he calls "The Closing Hymn." Now that tells its story, or it tells *a* story, without any help from the title. And the same may be said of "The Fair Devotee," "Played Out," "The Back Pew," "Gossips in the Pea-Field," or of any of the many others he

has made. His story is told on the canvas, and

there is rarely anything that might be confusing as to what has happened somewhere else or at some other time.

He takes his stories, like a wise man, from the material just about him, and therefore the beauties of his paintings are appreciated by those among whom he lives and the little story that each tells is eloquent of meaning, even to the dull imagination of the average person.

But where did he find all these women working in the fields in the United States? In Europe it is a common enough sight in all agricultural districts; and sometimes they are called upon for distressingly hard labor which should be performed by the men—and would be, no doubt, were they not away in the army. "Hoeing potatoes" is the hardest work indicated here, and the worker is evidently some solid German or Italian peasant who has not forgotten the lessons of her girlhood in the Fatherland. That this is the true reading of the picture is manifested by the artist's title for the group who lean upon their hoes and talk of the "news from the old country." Our American women go a-haying now and then,



CARRYING DRIED PEA-VINES.



NEWS FROM THE OLD COUNTRY.



PEA-PICKERS.

mainly for the fun of it, but they rarely or ever go *a-hoeing*.

The same remarks apply to the industrious dames weeding onions—a picture to be caught in many a market-garden on the outskirts of all American cities ; and why isn't it just as good as though these onions were grown in Brittany, and the women were gossiping as they



HOEING POTATOES.

and was educated there, where he still lives, and where, though he is just thirty, he has achieved great popularity. In the exhibitions in his own town his pictures have been conspicuous for ten years past ; in New York there is rarely a show at either the Academy or the Society at which he is not represented. He is also a portrait-painter, and there hangs in his studio at this time a portrait of a lady in white which would have cut no mean figure at the recent Exhibition of Woman's Portraits. Many of his paintings have been published, after being etched or engraved, and these have always met with a ready sale.

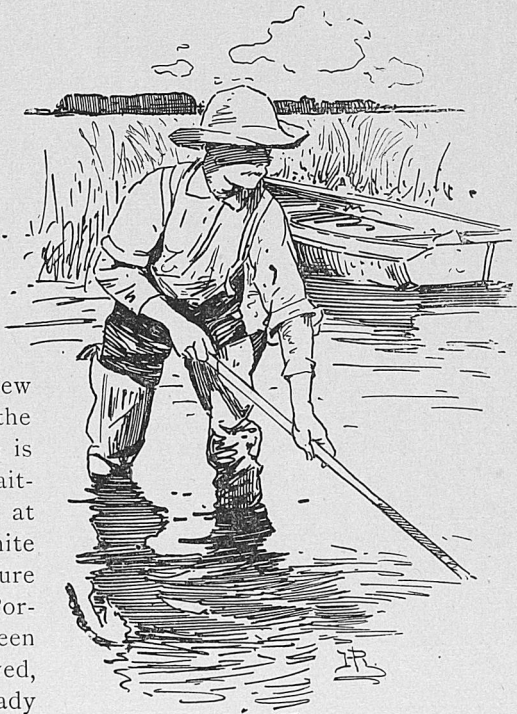


CRABBING IN JAMAICA BAY.

moved along in the quaint patois of that favorite province of France.

As for the *crabbing*, that takes us out of work into amusement ; though these men seem to be very business-like about it, and perhaps would be willing to exchange employments for a space with the pea-pickers.

Mr. Roseland is a native of Brooklyn,



AFTER SHEDDER CRABS.